

What Kind of Justice for a ‘Global New Deal’?

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Delivering the 2020 Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture, the United Nations Secretary General António Guterres recently set out a wide ranging critique of the current global order, characterised by pervasive, institutionalised inequality, and failed, nationalistic responses to the global Coronavirus crisis. In response he has called for the reform and reshaping of global governance structures, for a “New Social Contract” and a “Global New Deal”.¹ But what kind of justice is presented in the call for a Global New Deal?

In sharp contrast to the incompetence and the right wing populist bluster of Donald Trump and Boris Johnson the intervention by António Guterres is refreshing. Guterres presents the Coronavirus crisis not in terms of a ‘security emergency’, or a ‘war on the virus’ or a ‘conspiracy’, but starkly in terms of the failure of the post-war global political order which is beset by systematic and structural inequality. Guterres frames this inequality as multifaceted and intersectional, combining inequalities of wealth, gender, race and knowledge and stretching across populations and nations of the Global North and Global South. This is held in place by inequalities of political power within the institutions of global governance, across the UN Security Council and across the Bretton Woods institutions. Such inequality is the legacy of neo-colonialism and globalisation.² Guterres argues:

¹ António Guterres, ‘Tackling the Inequality Pandemic: A New Social Contract for a New Era.’ Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture, New York, 18 July 2020. <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/annual-lecture-2020-secretary-general-guterres-full-speech>

² Ibid.

“COVID-19 has been likened to an X-ray, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built. It is exposing fallacies and falsehoods everywhere: the lie that free markets can deliver healthcare for all; the fiction that unpaid care work is not work; the delusion that we live in a post-racist world; the myth that we are all in the same boat. Because while we are all floating on the same sea, it’s clear that some of us are in superyachts while others are clinging to the floating debris”.³

In response to the pandemic Guterres calls for the creation of a “New Social Contract” based upon sustainable development, social protection through investment in public services like education and healthcare, affirmative action policies to redress gender and racial inequality, multilateral cooperation on climate change, and policies of corporate taxation and economic redistribution.⁴ For Guterres this must go hand in hand with a “Global New Deal”, involving the reform of global governance institutions on the basis of “inclusive and equal participation”. Such a Global New Deal is to be:

“[b]ased on a fair globalisation, on the rights and dignity of every human being, on living in balance with nature, on taking account of the rights of future generations, and on success measured in human rather than economic terms...”⁵

Guterres’ call for the renegotiation of a global ‘New Social Contract’ and ‘New Deal’ can be thought in broader terms of Karl Polanyi’s idea of a ‘double movement’ with respect to forms of social struggle and the political and moral regulation of the economy. For Polanyi both social liberalism, and fascism, emerged in the 20th century as starkly differing reactions to the levels of social inequality, deprivation and international instability caused by widespread policies of

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

free market capitalism and European imperialism.⁶ The emergence of social democracy and the Keynesian welfare state in Western Europe and North America, such as Franklin Roosevelt's 'New Deal', was one set of responses to this. The mid-20th century social democratic regulation of capitalism in turn provoked neoliberal reaction and the subsequent political 'disembedding' of domestic economies and then the global capitalist economy from the 1970s to the present.⁷

Guterres' response to the rapid rise of global inequality sits then within a broader landscape of social democratic efforts to push back against the human and ecological devastation that has been wreaked by 40 years of neoliberal globalisation. In this respect his call sits alongside domestic proposals of a 'Green New Deal' suggested by sections of the left wing of the US Democratic Party and UK Labour Party. Guterres' call also sits alongside the intellectual traditions of social democratic 'cosmopolitan' theory and policy across the fields of development studies, international political theory, international relations, and international legal theory. In this the register and principles of social democratic, Keynesian welfare capitalism developed in Western Europe and North America is drawn upon to rethink in liberal internationalist, cosmopolitan terms the reform and transformation of global social relations and the institutions of global governance and international law. In speaking of "fair globalisation" Guterres' call echoes key elements of this social democratic cosmopolitan discourse developed by figures like Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, Thomas Pogge, David

⁶ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

⁷ For various accounts see: Fred Block, *The Origins of International Economic Disorder*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power, Vol 4: Globalizations, 1945-2011*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, trans. Patrick Camiller, (London: Verso, 2014); Richard Peet, *Unholy Trinity: The IMF, World Bank and WTO*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2009); Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis go to Waste*, (London: Verso, 2013).

Held and Jürgen Habermas.⁸ Broadly this is a vision of ‘global justice’ in which global capitalism is morally and politically regulated and put to use progressively for the benefit of the whole of humanity.

There is definitely some appeal to Guterres’ call to action, it is sprinkled with flashes of something more radical: the denunciation of the commodification of health and education; the recognition of the gendered nature of care in the home as unpaid work; the acknowledgement of the persistence of neo-colonialism. In this sense such a social democratic, cosmopolitan vision of global justice is more appealing than our current alternative marked by the failure and slow breakdown of the post-war global liberal order, rising nationalism and right-wing populism, and the ‘success’ of the Chinese authoritarian model of capitalist development.

Yet, there remains something fundamentally inadequate about Guterres’ call to action, which shares a set of limits and blind spots with the discourse of social democratic cosmopolitanism. Guterres’ account needs to be understood as sitting within a long tradition of Western scholarship and political action guided by the assumption that the fundamentally unequal and exclusionary idea of private property can be morally regulated, and, that the economic utility of self-interest can be channelled, regulated and made less socially destructive. Such a philosophical and economic narrative runs at least from Aristotle, through Cicero, Grotius, Smith, Keynes and Rawls, its contemporary language is that of ‘capabilities’, ‘socio-economic rights’, ‘corporate social responsibility’ and ‘sustainable development’.

⁸ Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, (London: Penguin, 2009); Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 2008); David Held, *Global Covenant: The Social Democratic Alternative to the Washington Consensus*, (Cambridge Polity Press, 2004); Jürgen Habermas, *The Divided West*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).

Yet this long and dominant intellectual tradition is marked by far too little awareness of the forms of violence, exclusion and exploitation which sit at the heart of the systems of social reproduction that have underpinned the historical development of private property, the emergence of capitalist economies, and the global political and juridical order that sustains globalised capitalist relations. In ignoring or underemphasising the fundamental forms of violence, exclusion and exploitation that make private property, capital accumulation and capitalist social reproduction possible, the efforts to morally regulate markets and capital consistently become unhinged and plod on by justifying past and contemporary modes of exploitation through narratives charity, welfare and future progress.

Thought of in this historical sense what is being pitched by Guterres is not so much a ‘new’ deal, but the repackaging of a distinctly old deal of the moral regulation of commercial society and capitalist markets updated with a few more nods to an expanded range of human rights, historical wrongs and a faith placed in environmental technical fixes. In many ways it represents a repackaging of a narrative of post-war Western economic prosperity and peace devoid of the key assumptions and presuppositions that made its brief moment of success possible: the successive waves of violent accumulation and dispossession domestically and through colonialism and empire; cheap resource extraction and environmental destruction; the exploitation of labour wherever it could be found; the exploitation of the unpaid, unrecognised gendered labour of women in the home; the exclusion of non-citizens from a small zone of Western prosperity and peace; and the holding of all of this together through the interventionist violence of US global hegemony.

Pitched against the ravages of neoliberal globalisation and rising tide of authoritarianism and right wing populism the repackaging of the social democratic old deal as a new deal may seem

promising, but is this way of thinking truly up to the task of offering the world a plan to get to grips with the current overlapping set of crises facing humanity? The exploitation of the natural environment and biosphere, the exclusionary social relations of private property and capital accumulation, the alienation and exploitation of labour, the exploitation of gendered labour, the predatory operation of financial capital, the commodification of all things and humans, the cultural hegemony of market rationality, consumerism and individualism. All of this is hardwired into the current globalised system of capitalist social reproduction.⁹

To think of reforming and morally regulating contemporary capitalism as some form of global social democratic settlement might cure some of the ills brought by neoliberal globalisation, and might make some forms of poverty a little less severe. Yet it is also incredibly naïve to think that if we continue to gloss over and ignore the fundamental forms of violence, exploitation and exclusion that sit at the heart of contemporary capitalist social reproduction, our world could ever become anything radically different from what it currently is. It is also incredibly naïve to think that the old model of Western social democratic capitalism can be repackaged for the globe absent of the manifold forms of violence which made that slice of Western peace and prosperity possible.

Reflection upon the violence of capitalist social reproduction, and the moral rejection of this, has to inform any idea of an egalitarian and democratic global constitutional settlement. Anything less, portrayed as ‘global justice’, merely scratches the surface and offers a bit of moral comfort while the exploitation and degradation of the earth and humanity rages on.

⁹ For differing accounts see: Stephen Gill, *Power and Resistance in the New World Order*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003); William I. Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Boaventura De Sousa Santos, *Toward a New Legal Common Sense: Law, Globalization, and Emancipation*, (London: Butterworths, 2002); Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle*, (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012).

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